

# **The Labyrinth in Therapy: role and possibilities of the Labyrinth in Gestalt Therapy**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the value and process of imbuing therapeutic symbol, imagery and metaphor as a means of stimulating the client in a way that assists him or her to work in an unexpected and innovative manner. I have combined what is known about labyrinths as tools for centering the mind and enhancing personal awareness (through Gestalt therapy) with the objective of integrating mind, body and spirit through symbol, imagery and metaphor. The labyrinth helps to develop emotions and intuitions into meaningful metaphors which can be easily internalized by the client. This offers the opportunity to connect different aspects of the clients' experience in ways in which they have not been connected before, allowing room for further exploration.

The paper explores two aspects: firstly, the metaphorical, spiritual and ritualistic aspects of the labyrinth, and secondly, the practical process of walking the labyrinth and how it might assist a client in becoming fully aware. In addition I recognize that Gestalt philosophy proposes that individuals are active in choosing and organizing their lives.

## **Key Words**

Gestalt; labyrinths; therapeutic tool.

## **Introduction**

Today labyrinths are reappearing in our midst. Throughout Europe, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand they appear in public squares, malls, spas, hospitals, churches, parks and private gardens. It is part of my personal journey to explore people's fascination with these ancient symbols and the profound experiences they often report. As a Gestalt trainee, I have chosen to use the principles underlying Gestalt therapy to assist in the search for meaning and understanding. Ultimately the intention is to develop a style of therapeutic counselling which incorporates the use of the labyrinth to the benefit of both the client and the therapist. This enables the therapist to work truly holistically, enhancing all aspects of the client's awareness in the service of the client's personal exploration. This approach is in line with Ornstein's (1972) approach of synthesizing rational thinking and intuitive creativity in the process of therapy. It allows the therapist to actively evoke and work with the creative and intuitive insights of the client without verbalizing the logical perspectives of theoretical conceptualization. Gestalt has the ability to respond to changing circumstances in the world, to changing needs of clients and to the changing climate in the field of counselling and psychotherapy (Yontef, 1991; Parlett and Hemming, 1996). The language of symbol and imagery is the language of the unconscious and the transpersonal, it enables us to visit our inner world and find our own deeper intuitive wisdom.

There are many uses of the labyrinth. However in this paper I will focus on those usages which make the labyrinth interesting from a therapeutic point of view. Consequently

known usages such as meditation, relaxation, celebration and sacred dance will not be addressed here.

## **The Labyrinth**

The labyrinth is often described by the number of circles or rings that comprise it. The opening through which the labyrinth walkers begin their journey is called the ‘mouth’ or entrance. The walkway or trail of the labyrinth is called the “path”. The sides are the “walls”. The parts are usually strategically placed and have an internal symbolism. The circular path of the classical labyrinth is very significant. Labyrinths come in many different shapes and sizes. Nevertheless for all their differences they share common elements. They have a “unicursal” path and no dead end; consequently there is only one route. This represents the metaphor of life, our life as one path whatever turns it may take. Remaining on the path (of life) the walker will eventually arrive at the centre. The labyrinth is part of a tradition of symbols involving circular movement. The labyrinth is part of the canon of archetypal symbolic circles of meaning- including wholeness, unity and the divine centre in cultures around the globe and in every period from prehistory to the present. No one knows where the labyrinth originated but they have been traced to the cradle of Western civilization in the Mediterranean. According to Jeff Saward the earliest labyrinth designs have been discovered on clay tablets in Phyllos in Greece. The tablets contain the design of a labyrinth 3,200 years old. Also found are Syrian pot shards showing a labyrinth and a seventh century B.C. wine jar from Tagliatella depicting armed soldiers on horseback riding from the labyrinth. The labyrinth symbol was widely adapted by the Romans and transported throughout the Roman Empire from Britain to Eastern Europe to North Africa. There is a good reason labyrinths have endured for many centuries. They appear to offer a special kind of spiritual balm and symbolism not

commonly available. Robert Ferré, director of the St. Louis Labyrinth project has said that:

*“Walking the labyrinth is another way of tapping into forces beyond our normal conscious mind. It takes us to some ancient part of ourselves, as old as the turning of the planets and stars, as old as the goddess and earth energies, back when night was dark, when people knew the sky and nature was part of us and we of it. This is something lost in our modern world, and the imbalance it causes cries out for resolution. That’s why the labyrinth touches so many people so forcefully”.*

## **The Labyrinth and My Personal Journey**

In the course of my reading on the labyrinth I have found there to be an insignificant amount of writing on the labyrinth and its potential for use in therapy. All the books on labyrinths and mazes mention mythology, spirituality, and ritual but none do so from a therapeutic perspective. Consequently it is my hope that this paper will spark further discussion and interest in labyrinths, their therapeutic potential and in due course encourage solid research.

I have an eleven circuit turf Chartres labyrinth in my back garden. You may well ask, what is a Chartres labyrinth and how did it come to be there? The Chartres labyrinth is a medieval eleven circuit marble labyrinth on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral, where it was placed in 1201. Of the eighty Gothic Cathedrals that were built during the Middle Ages, twenty two of them had labyrinths. Sadly, the only one remaining in its original form is at Chartres Cathedral. Our labyrinth was initially my husband's project. He brought the drawings of the Chartres labyrinth with him from the Netherlands. He had been given them by an elderly woman who had a turf labyrinth in her back paddock for some twelve years. It had become too big a job for her to continue to maintain. She knew that Herman was moving to New Zealand and had an interest in such things. Her story is an interesting one. Her daughter, in her late teens died suddenly of a degenerative disease. During the process of cleaning through her daughter's room she found a card the daughter had sent her several months earlier while she was on bicycle tour through France with friends. While cycling she visited Chartres Cathedral and bought a postcard of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth. The mother was struck by this symbol and set about

some time later creating it in her paddock as part of the process of working through the loss of her daughter. She walked it most days and took great solace from its presence. Twelve years later she was ready to move on, ready to hand on the drawings and 'the magic' to us. So several months after our return to New Zealand we set about carefully positioning the labyrinth in relation to East-West and the ley-lines of the land (which we found using divining rods) and embarked upon the laborious task of marking it out. The labyrinth is fifty metres across so it was no small task. To activate the energy field of the labyrinth the positioning of the labyrinth is all important. Originally labyrinths were placed on sacred ground. In modern times we have expanded upon the history and significance of labyrinths and perhaps relaxed the requirement to have them cosmically centred, as they once were and hence we begin to see them appear in people's gardens, in hospital grounds and in other places where people regularly congregate.

While the preparation was underway I busied myself reading up on the mysteries of the labyrinth but remained somewhat sceptical, though very eager to discover whether I too might experience its 'magic'. I patiently waited for the grass to grow and the paths to be mown and one day I set about walking the labyrinth's quiet friendly paths. My first experience was one of amazement, but not in the spiritual sense, it had more to do with the excitement of having such a large gentle structure of such grandeur in *my* back garden.

Two years ago I could not have contemplated the labyrinth attracting my interest. Perhaps it has appeared at a time when I myself am ready to explore such possibilities, as though it is a part of my own spiritual journey. I walk our labyrinth regularly and each time, before I start I wonder what will come, whether I too will experience 'the magic'

this time round. Each time my journey is different, each time my journey becomes a little more profound, a little more spiritual, a little more intriguing. This process is a very slow one. As I grow so my experience grows, or is it the other way round? I continue to be fascinated by the experience of others, as they walk the labyrinth, their experiences are hugely varied. Some declare they have had profound experiences. So each day I walk with the anticipation that perhaps today will be ‘the day’. But with every step I am, I believe, coming to the realization that each step is miraculous in of itself, each gentle movement forward is a step in the ‘right’ direction, a step toward self understanding and self enlightenment. For some that is a slower process than for others. So daily I continue to pursue and enjoy the process of greater self–understanding and I continue to marvel at where other’s are on the continuum of life’s astonishing journey.

### **Modern Use in Gestalt Therapy**

In our rationalistic and materialistic world, many of us are taught to mistrust our emotions and our hearts. It can be very liberating when people enter a labyrinth and discover that it can become a journey into their deepest emotions and thoughts. Taking everything through the layers to the heart of the matter is the centre of each piece of work in Gestalt. A journey towards a centre that symbolizes the ‘heart’ of all their experience.

While walking the path some report a deep sense of connection to a divine or transcendent force or with their own being or selfhood. Four words: feeling, heart, connection and selfhood, appear to sum up the essence of our modern fascination with the labyrinth.

Within the Gestalt therapeutic tradition experiments are often used to explore new ways of being and behaving to heighten self awareness and to energize self support. Clients

learn about themselves through experiments within the therapeutic session. Active methods of exploration, such as walking the labyrinth, are highly compatible with Gestalt's holistic approach. The emphasis is on the whole of the person not just their words. In line with the Gestalt tradition of experiments it is my intention within this paper to introduce the labyrinth as a Gestalt tool.

The German word Gestalt means a whole or a complete pattern, form or configuration, which cannot be broken without destroying its very nature. One might argue that the labyrinth experience is a metaphor for a Gestalt cycle of experience. We create patterns and constructs of our experience: we have a spontaneous urge to complete or make meaning out of perceptual stimuli such as the labyrinth. Jan Smuts (1995) developed the physicists' concept that everything has a field, proposing that things, ideas, animals, plants and persons like physical forces have their fields, and are unintelligible if considered without those fields. We incorporate emotional 'figures' or 'gestalten' against the background of the rest of the field. When we do so, we experience closure. Closure arises as a result of feeling emotional satisfaction, integration, insight and completion. Or we may also experience closure as a result of grieving, insight, and letting go. Perhaps it is the labyrinth's ability to physically and symbolically represent a cycle of life that compares with a Gestalt cycle of experience that makes it such a powerful therapeutic tool.

*“Everything can become a labyrinth: love and our relationship with our parents, school and career, politics and legislation, loss of employment and a new job. Everywhere the centre threatens to disappear. The drug addict feels as though in a labyrinth; the sufferer from Alzheimer's disease plunges into the labyrinth of*

*oblivion. The psychological crisis leads into the labyrinth of the soul. And don't the convolutions of the brain resemble those of the labyrinth?" (Wolff, 2003)*

When individuals walk the labyrinth they actively organize and make meaning of their experience according to their current needs and prevailing conditions (Lewin, 1952). The act of walking the Labyrinth is akin to or representative of the cycle of interdependence of the individual and their environment.

The process of walking the labyrinth reminds me of the phases of figure formation and destruction in a single contact episode within the Gestalt cycle of experience. The contact episode is made up of sensation; awareness; mobilization; action; contact or expression; integration and assimilation; and withdrawal. The Labyrinth seems to heighten the process of figure formation or at least the awareness of figure formation and the urge to complete the cycle of contact. An individual's process of figure formation and destruction is complex, lively and continually flowing and it interacts with other elements and processes of the field. Sometimes an individual's interest will change spontaneously and the first figure will recede to be replaced by a new more absorbing aspect of themselves or their field.

There are four ways in which I believe the labyrinth could be readily incorporated in Gestalt therapy. An individual can draw upon the labyrinth as a having a spiritual dimension as a tool of ritual or as a metaphor for life, or simply as a method of heightening body awareness. These are considered in more detail below.

### ***Spirituality***

The transpersonal dimension to therapy refers to those aspects of the therapeutic process that go beyond the limits of the individual and that connect us with each other and to other spiritual dimensions. Labyrinth work can be adapted to use with clients of varying spiritual belief systems and provides a framework for working spiritually with clients from diverse backgrounds. The labyrinth uses the faith or devotional component in a transpersonal force as an integral part of the therapeutic process. Medieval Christian labyrinth designs were used by the devout. They considered that crawling around the labyrinth on their knees to be the spiritual equivalent of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Over the course of time the labyrinth has used this faith component as an integral part of the therapeutic process. The labyrinth provides a framework for those psychotherapists who want to include spirituality and ritual as part of their therapeutic tools or strategies. The intent is not to impose a belief system on the client but to work with the client's own existing belief system.

Spiritual experiences are said to be common in labyrinths. Walkers report mystical states including union with a divine force or communion with 'spirit energies'. Some manage to resolve longstanding problems or grief or struggles with issues related to relationship and forgiveness. A sense of connectedness through the labyrinth to a spiritual realm, can offer people support and healing and give meaning to their lives. Therapeutic approaches have frequently shied away from discussing the place of transpersonal and spiritual issues in their theory and have hesitated to explore spiritual beliefs or needs with clients within the therapy process, with the exceptions of for example Hycner, 1988; Schoen, 1978; Elkin, 1979. Clients who do not subscribe to a particular religion often find that they believe in a creator, deity or some kind of supernatural energy that is larger than

themselves. Jung suggested that a desire to have a relationship with a 'higher power' is inherent in humans (Hopcke, 1989). Others see spirituality as personal, as one's 'higher self'. Yet others feel only a tentative connection to this power and as a consequence it will not be of immediate assistance in the therapeutic process.

Yet by adding a spiritual element to therapy, the client experiences a feeling of connection to the universe, a sense of collaboration with forces outside their personality, and empowerment in their own life. It seems to be a contradiction that if one admits 'powerlessness' then one feels empowered, something akin to the paradoxical theory of change in Gestalt theory. Perhaps it is only by acknowledging limitations and weaknesses that an individual learns that he or she can ask for assistance. For many, spirituality is the 'glue' that holds the multi dimensional quality of life together and provides the self-empowerment necessary for lasting transformation of self.

The therapist should be mindful of the client's pathology. Clients who have a thought disorder may not be able to appreciate the symbolic nature of the ritual enactment of change, and ritual therapy may actually be constrain-dictated for such client.

### ***Ritual***

Our understanding of ritual has been drawn from studies of culture in which all life was viewed as sacred. As anthropology meets psychology there is a debate as to whether ritual is essentially a religious or a social phenomenon. As all societies create rituals, so they also create theologies. The common use of ritual in therapy lifts ritual out of its sacred context and allows the individual to integrate it into their being. Using ritual as part of psychotherapy is not a new idea (Bewley, 1995; Gilligan 1993; Al-Krenawi,

1999). Ritual used in psychotherapy has often been included in behavior modification (Ai-Krenawi, 1999). Ritual as defined here includes a structured set of actions developed collaboratively by the therapist and client to effect a transition from one psychological state to another. The transition may reflect a developmental stage or the transition may be a significant life event, such as a divorce or a death. Alternatively the transition may be focused on intrapersonal or interpersonal change, such as releasing one's anger toward another through a forgiveness ritual (e.g. Ferch, 1998). Bewley (1995) has posited the idea that emphasizing the spiritual element augments the healing power of ritual by making it necessary for the participants to clearly articulate their intentions.

Speiser (1998) has suggested that ritual is used to access deep psychic forces and structures, thereby enabling healing and transformation of the client's emotional life on an unconscious level. Finding ways of expressing and making meaning of our lives is often accompanied by ritual. Use of the labyrinth helps to integrate both the spiritual aspects of ritual and the secular purpose of therapy. Ritual can serve to heal, to empower, and to change consciousness and behaviour and further the work of 'ordinary therapy'. The role of the therapist is to help the client reconnect with an understanding and experience of the ritual that works for them and to implement that experience into the therapeutic setting.

When a client and therapist decide to use ritual, in the form of the labyrinth, as an expression of their spiritual belief, the therapist helps the client to create metaphorical symbols that are concrete manifestations of the client's personal power and the therapeutic goals of psychological healing. This process might also serve to remind the client of her innate ability to tap into universal power and to access divine energy. The

symbolic nature of ritual may then be able to create a lasting memory in the client's psyche. The ritual mirrors the ongoing therapeutic process, providing a metaphor for the inner changes through symbolism and enactment. Imbuing ritual with the sacred and expanding its use in therapy makes it a powerful healing process. Wyrostok (1995) listed the therapeutic properties of ritual as the structure of the ritual, the inclusion of a public witness, the promotion of relatedness and social bonding, the power of symbolism to change unconscious meanings of emotional distress, and the neurobiologically altered state that allows for a deeper level of experience. Rando (1985) suggested that rituals were therapeutically powerful because they necessitated the behavioural expression of thought and feeling and they touched the unconscious more quickly than talking therapies because they tapped into right-brain processing modes.

### ***Metaphor***

The labyrinth can be used as a metaphor for the client's journey through life. The Labyrinth has a centre symbolizing wholeness and completeness, the heart of the matter, the human heart. The centre of the labyrinth represents the interface between the client's deepest fears and highest hopes. From the centre we see (metaphorically) the pattern of life laid out around us. Where we have been and where we are going. The centre however, is where we see ourselves most clearly and sometimes where we connect most deeply to the self and others. So how could a simple pattern, a few lines drawn into the ground, elicit such a powerful response? Historically this question has been much debated. Throughout the ages many have tried to understand the use and purpose of the labyrinth. The inspiration for the modern revival of the labyrinth can be traced to the

Mediterranean legend of Theseus and the Minotaur. Some point to ancient mythology and ritual, while others attach symbolic meaning to the labyrinth. It symbolizes a way in, a single clear path into an interior reality, a track through the layers of an individual's consciousness, holding archetypal significance. Myths frequently speak in archetypes. Examples of archetypes include the hero, goddess, the shadow, and the messenger. These archetypes are found in each of us, and through awareness of the way they work in myth we can come to a greater understanding of ourselves.

With the intention of using the labyrinth as a tool for Gestalt it becomes important not to underestimate the power of the metaphor. A path, like a door is very seductive, it offers the promise of excitement and new discoveries but also of guidance, a way through the complexities of life. Individuals derive hope that their journey will eventually lead them to their destination. In this respect the labyrinth provides us with a sense of accomplishment, as the path becomes metaphorical for rebirth and renewal.

*“We look into the mirror of our souls. These are days of pain, self-doubt, mourning and of awakening. In them lies a great opportunity for transformation and renewal; we do not need to remain as we are. We can turn back, try a new path. We can change our lives. Mysterious powers of transformation are hidden in the labyrinth. The labyrinth is a path towards rebirth in the midst of life. At its entrance are encouraging messages- trust in yourself, you know more than you think! Trust in yourself, you can change your life! Trust in yourself, you will find the way!”(Wolff, 2003)*

The path back from the centre shows us possibilities where we used to experience barriers and doubt. On the way out we may experience our best insights, and perhaps

even major breakthroughs. Walking the path out of the labyrinth from the centre many report their lives changed.

That which has been outlined above may even apply in a stronger sense within the group setting. The path turns back on itself forcing us to confront the other, the stranger we see in front of us, in whose features we sometimes recognize ourselves. People say they learn a lot about themselves from their encounters with fellow walkers. How they pass or are passed and how they feel at close proximity to strangers gives them clues about their relationships with others. It has a capacity to allow us to see ourselves for who we are and accept what we see.

### ***Body Experience***

Body process is central to all aspects of Gestalt therapy with particular attention to energy flow and the breath of life. Fritz and Laura Perls trained in creative movement and dramatic methods. Fritz was deeply influenced by William Reich of bio-energetics and body therapy fame. Laura Perls was influenced by Isadore From and trained in phenomenology. The body and mind are said to co-operate simultaneously. In experimental work using the labyrinth we are inviting clients to embody psychological experience and explore it through that embodiment. Attending to bodily experience needs to be an important part of any therapeutic experience for the simple reason that our emotional lives are experienced through and in our bodies. In Gestalt therapy the therapist draws the client's attention to the physical manifestations of awareness as a part of the total functioning organism. At the core of the dialogical therapy approach is an overriding concern with the whole, not focusing only on one aspect such as the

interpsychic, or the interpersonal or transpersonal dimension. By learning to focus awareness and thus discovering what *is*, rather than what *should be*, or what *could have been* the client learns to trust themselves through an awareness of their total physical body response. This is called the optimum development of self-support and it is through awareness that the splits which have developed are able to be reintegrated and the client can become more whole as he or she begins to deal with their avoidances. Gestalt's holistic approach affirms the complexity of persons and events within a 'whole making' universe (Smuts, 1995) and has room to include all the possibly relevant dimensions of human beings who meet in psychotherapy. Unlike the 'sit down and talk' (physically restrictive) the labyrinth offers a 'get up and walk' physically mobilizing experience. Walking the 'unicursal' path of the labyrinth is a physical expression of giving direction to your life. In so doing the individual increases a truly holistic awareness of their perceptions and interactions with others.

Some people claim they want to change their behaviour but it is my belief that most people seek psychotherapy for the relief of some kind of discomfort. Be it anxiety, depression or specific discomfort like headache, stiff neck, knotted stomach etc. Furthermore their usual expectation is that relief will be the result of the therapist doing the work, rather than through their own efforts. Walking the labyrinth reminds the client physically that he has control over his own life's journey. So the physical effort required by the client in walking the labyrinth is an unspoken representation of their own work which requires attending to by them and not the therapist.

The body experience in the labyrinth is an expansion upon the traditional Gestalt experiment and presents another way of exploring how the client is and behaves.

## **Guidelines for using the Labyrinth therapeutically**

The Labyrinth works on the assumption that the client has a certain degree of faith in themselves to change and is open to a reality greater than themselves regardless of what their specific belief system might be. Modern usage of the labyrinth allows for the incorporation of individual belief systems using these as agents of change, either on a conscious or unconscious level. The role of the therapist is to help the client reconnect with a new understanding of his or her life's journey and to implement that experience into the ongoing therapeutic relationship. Prior to the introduction of the client to the labyrinth the therapist will need to spend some time describing the use and the possibilities of this therapeutic tool. The following paragraphs detail how a therapist might approach the use of the labyrinth with their client.

The labyrinth tool is structured upon the distinct successive phases of introduction, centering, assessment, gathering energy, directing energy, gratitude and closure. The successive phases are explained to the client to strengthen their experiential sense of self as they walk the labyrinth. In so doing the therapeutic ritual takes on an added dimension because it allows the client to deepen and strengthen their faith in a power outside themselves while at the same time becoming more fully empowered. On the basis of what the labyrinth represents the therapist conveys the message to the client that they can have faith in a power outside themselves (regardless of what that power might be) without taking away the client's unique sense of self.

- The introduction: therapist and client should explore life themes which are relevant to the client's immediate needs. The therapist can ask the client to share their religious beliefs and any belief that aligns the client's will with the spiritual

that might create the most beneficial circumstances in their life. The therapist informs the client about the ways in which the labyrinth can integrate experiential learning and the physical experience.

- Centering: referring to the process of grounding or making connection with the earth which can be achieved by becoming aware of one's body or taking time to become aware of the surroundings. Acknowledging the space the labyrinth encompasses as sacred, stating the intention of the labyrinth journey, and perhaps the client asking for help from another realm.
- Assessment of the client's issue or problem: it is helpful for the client to understand what changes are desired in order to develop the awareness of old psychic structures and the desired changes to these structures. During the resting phase in the middle of the labyrinth (if the size of the labyrinth allows), the client's progress can be further assessed. This also provides the client with an opportunity to reaffirm his or her intentions and to discover any psychological impediments to the process.
- Gathering energy: as the client walks he or she should focus on the steps and the path in front of them. The client's mind should be open and receptive to the experience of gently walking the path ahead. If the client is distracted by other thoughts, simply let them go and return focus to each step taken along the path. The act of shedding thoughts allows the client to let go of the details of their life, enabling them to open their hearts and quiet the mind.
- Directing energy: this may take place in the centre. The client can sit or stand, facing which ever direction they choose. The centre is the place for meditation,

for waiting, listening or prayer. The client can remain in this spot for as long as desired. Leaving the centre the client follows the same path out. There is often a strange sense of strengthening and clarity as the client becomes more empowered to find and do the work their soul is calling for.

- Acknowledgment, honoring and the offering of gratitude to the labyrinth and all that it has symbolized for the client: before leaving the labyrinth, the client can pause for a few moments to reflect on their experience, the blessings or insights they might have gained.
- Closure: after the journey is complete the therapist and the client may discuss the process of designing the ritual, the ritual itself and any enlightenment thrown on the client's needs. A ritual of this kind is likely to take longer than a typical fifty minute therapy session, so it is important for the therapist and client to be flexible in this respect.

## Barriers to the Labyrinth

As in all therapeutic techniques there are limits to the use of the labyrinth. For instance not all clients have the physical ability to walk the labyrinth. Instead there are alternatives- fingerwalking boards, ideal for bedridden people. These consist of grooved indentations for the finger to trace. Some boards have left- handed and right-handed labyrinths side by side.

For the ritual to be optimally effective the client should have an understanding of the significance of ritual and a belief that change is possible. Some clients may find this process unsettling and not be open to designing their own ritual, preferring instead to adhere to the prescription of the therapist. Gilligan (1993) suggested that for a ritual to be productive, the client must be fully committed. In addition not all problems may be amenable to a ritual solution. Problems most suggestive of ritual intervention include those that are longstanding, somatically focused and non rational or non-cognitively based, (Gilligan, 1993). Further research and theoretical investigation into the use of the labyrinth will hopefully elucidate specific mechanisms, benefits and limitations of using this as a therapeutic tool. Currently there are studies being carried out on the healing effects of labyrinth walking on such diseases as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's.

Generally there is relatively little research being carried out in Gestalt therapy. Fagan and Shepherd (1970, p.241) say

*“most often, hard data are difficult to obtain: the important variables resist quantification; the complexity and multiplicity of variables in therapist, patient, and the interactional processes are almost impossible to unravel; and the*

*crudeness and restrictiveness of the measuring devices available cannot adequately reflect the subtlety of the process. However, the fact that the task is difficult does not reduce its importance and the need for many questions to be asked and answered by more formal procedures available to researchers”.*

Another barrier is the potential for therapist’s role boundaries to be confused if the therapist engages in walking the labyrinth with the client (Richards and Bergin 1997). A framework is required that allows ritual to be included in therapy with clearly specified parameters and for a clear purpose. In the above paragraph the author has attempted to define the process more concretely in an attempt to differentiate those parameters.

Other barriers to this particular method of Gestalt therapy may be of a more practical nature, for example the availability and accessibility to a labyrinth. The location and size of the labyrinth may also impose restrictions to therapeutic use.

## **Conclusion**

The labyrinth invites people to share a common experience and for those seeking a less overtly or non-Christian experience the labyrinth offers a long history to draw on for inspiration. The chance to walk the same pathway traveled by our ancestors, to tread the same footsteps of visitors gone before, continues to draw new pilgrims. The labyrinth's charms invite playfulness and soulfulness, delight as well as curiosity. Perhaps it is the interaction with mystery contained within its circuitous paths that appeals so widely to our modern imagination. To be more specific, for a client to walk a labyrinth is to make a journey towards a specific goal, whatever that goal may be. Therapeutically the client can reach their goal physically, spiritually or metaphorically. The appeal that the labyrinth holds is as an allegory for the complexities of the journey through life and this seems to have been recognized through the ages.

As mentioned above the author sees each therapeutic encounter with the client in conjunction with the labyrinth as a complete gestalt cycle. Whatever is figural at the beginning of the labyrinth journey is what is focused on and worked with- be it a rehearsed program, an immediate awareness of some sensory or motor experience, a feeling of confusion, or recall of unfinished business.

In the author's view the labyrinth adds another dimension to the therapeutic relationship heightening awareness, energizing self support, expressing what is on the edge of awareness and thereby re-owning the disowned aspects of self. The experience can even assist in rehearsing and practicing options for new behaviours (Joyce & Sills, 2001).

For the therapist the appeal of the labyrinth lies in its ability to enhance therapeutic interventions on four levels simultaneously. The levels being a metaphorical

understanding of one's journey, the spiritual dimensions of that journey, the significance of ritual in the process and the physical dimension of that experience. In this way the labyrinth becomes a means to accessing the four levels mentioned above simultaneously. Through these dimensions the client and the therapist are assisted in accessing aspects of the client which under normal therapeutic conditions may not be so readily evident.

I would like to add that rather than continuing to remove the spiritual and the ritual from the therapeutic setting to fit the traditional view that therapy is a secular process is to perpetuate a false dichotomy, we can shift our point of view in therapy to see our work as multilayered of which spirituality forms one of those layers within a 'whole-making' universe (Smuts, 1995), affirming Gestalt's holistic approach.

**Note:** The study for this article included books on Labyrinths and I was informed by the following texts which may be of interest to readers who would like more information:

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